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Arlene McCormack

*University of Lowell*

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# Strategies to Combat Racism on Campus: A Case Study of Class- Based Action Research\*

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*Arlene McCormack, Ph.D.*  
*University of Lowell*

## ABSTRACT

One desirable outcome of learning about society is that students will use this knowledge to improve the social environment. Instructors of sociology research courses can strengthen the likelihood of this consequence by designing courses that provide students with "hands on" training in using social knowledge to "better" the social environment of their own academic communities. This paper discusses an undergraduate research course designed to meet this objective—a study of racism on campus. This paper elaborates on the problems and experiences in doing research in this sensitive area of study. The survey, designed by the students in this course, is included with the hope that other instructors at other colleges and universities will repeat this, or a similar study, in their own institutions.

## Introduction

There are two important objectives for instructors of *any* sociology course. The first objective is that students must understand and think critically about the society in which they live. We commonly assess our success in this area by giving students quizzes, tests, and term papers; and we have met this objective successfully enough to maintain sociology as an important social science discipline.

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\*A similar paper was presented at the Annual American Sociological Association Meetings, San Francisco, California (August 1989).

The second objective is that students will activate their understanding and awareness in a manner that will make society "better." Unlike the first, this objective is difficult to assess. It is usually assessed only in retrospective and only if we are made aware of the exploits of former students. While one might argue that students using any knowledge to "better" society is an outcome that can only be "hoped for," sociology research courses *can* be designed to provide students with "hands on" training in using one's knowledge of society to make that society better.

Instructors of research methods courses have elaborated on the value of the "hands on" research experience, in general, as a way of providing students with firsthand knowledge of research techniques (Campbell, 1970; Cutler, 1987; Ransford & Butler, 1982; Schutt, Blalock & Wagenaar, 1984; Takata & Leiting, 1987). Indeed, the foundation for creating a course that provides "hands on" training in bettering society is found in what has been termed the "learning by doing" model (Takata & Leiting, 1987).

Many research courses based on this model have two main characteristics: (1) the course is designed so that students engage in a full-length piece of research from study design to analysis of the results, and (2) the class engages in the study of a prevalent social issue or problem. However, those who argue the effectiveness of these characteristics do so on the basis that this course design enlivens research courses, enhances student learning of research method techniques, and increases positive student attitudes toward social research.

While these are admittedly worthwhile outcomes, restructuring a research course to enable students to undertake a full-length piece of research or to focus on social problems can, more importantly, set the stage for "hands on" training in using social research knowledge to "better" society.

Further, for a research course to be fully effective in reaching this objective, students should not just engage in full-length research and focus on social problems, but students should engage in study of a social problem within their own academic community and attempt to use the results of their full-length study to change and better that community. Since most social scientists concur that educational institutions are largely microcosms of our greater society, with a few idiosyncrasies, many issues that have been defined as social problems in the larger milieu can be expected to be reflected on college campuses. Thus, institutional self-study in socially defined problem areas offers the students' a realistic training ground for trying to implement social change. This paper discusses such a self-study in a course designed to teach the "bettering of society" by using a full-length research project to attempt to improve the quality of the academic community—a course designed to study racism on campus.

## Choosing Racism

Why was racism chosen? Over the last few years, American campuses have seen a resurgence of blatant racism (Bowen, 1987; Collison, 1987; Farrell, 1988; McConnell, 1987; McCurdy, 1988; *Newsweek*, 1987; *Boston Globe*, 1988; *New York Times*, 1978a, 1978b). While some may argue that this resurgence of racism can be attributed to the resurgence of media attention to this issue, there is wide consensus that the increase of reported discriminatory incidents reflects the resurgence of racism nationwide and the potential reversal of civil rights and affirmative action gains. On campus, this situation manifests itself in derogatory epithets scrawled on walls, physical assaults and verbal abuse, as well as more subtle forms of intimidation (Brown, 1987; Farrell, 1988).

Many academic institutions do not take incidents of campus racism seriously, tending instead to believe that these incidents are isolated and not representative of the day-to-day life of minority students. Increasingly, however, college and university personnel are being sensitized to the fact that racist incidents are ongoing and influence both the academic performance and the attrition of minority students. This knowledge has moved some academic institutions to develop and test different strategies to counter this problem. Basic, however, to the development of strategies is institutional awareness that a problem, real or potential, may exist on every campus. To aid in that awareness, institutional self-study is necessary.

## The Study

### Methodology

This study of discrimination against minority students on campus was carried out by nineteen students enrolled in the Sociology Department's Social Research Course, under the direction of the class instructor.

Data were gathered from 132 nonforeign minority undergraduate students using a self-administered anonymous survey. Members of three minority groups—Asians, African-Americans, and Hispanics—were selected by way of proportional quota sampling: i.e., by determining the percentage of the nonforeign minority undergraduate population that each group represented on campus.

Quotas for the three groups were based on the number of these students enrolled at the university in academic year 1987–88. According to information from the Office of Admissions, the undergraduate minority population at the university is approximately 51 percent Asian, 30 percent African-American, and 19 percent Hispanic (N=315). To increase the representativeness of the study

sample, a large sample size of 132 students (42 percent) was chosen. Thus, the sample includes 67 Asian students, 40 African-American students, 25 Hispanic students (see Table 1).

The quotas were distributed over the nineteen class members so that each class member was assigned to survey several particular minority students. Minority students were approached by class members and asked to participate in the study. If the student chose to participate, he or she was instructed to fill out the survey anonymously, put it in a plain white envelope, seal it, and drop it into a larger manilla envelope that contained other completed surveys. An unavoidable bias in this method is that students may be likely to approach minority students who are physically distinct. Thus, minority students who are not noticeably Asian, African-American, or Hispanic may be under-represented.

Table 1: Study Sample Quotas

Non-Foreign Minority Proportion Undergraduate Students (N=315)	Percent of Minority Students	Sample (N=132)
Asian (n=160)	51%	67
African-American (n=96)	30%	40
Hispanic (n=59)	19%	25

### Measurement

A survey questionnaire, including ten structured and two open-ended questions, was used to elicit information about minority student demographic characteristics and experiences of discrimination on campus. Demographic information includes the student's minority group membership, sex, length of time at the university, college residence, and the educational level of parental head of household. Discrimination data include student experiences with such incidents, the nature of the incidents, the sources of the incidents, and the reporting practices of those who experienced discrimination (see Appendix A).

### Nonresponse Rate

A total of 138 minority students were approached to take part in the study. Of these, six refused (nonresponse rate = 4 percent). No systematic bias could be attributed to nonresponse.

## Analysis

Data were analyzed via the university VAX VMS Operations System using the Statistical Packages for Social Scientists (SPSSX) (SPSS, Inc., 1988). Frequency distributions were used to assess the extent, nature, and source of discrimination on campus, as well as student reporting practices. Cross-tabular analysis was used to determine the relationships between minority student demographic characteristics and the likelihood of experiencing discrimination at the University of Lowell.

## Limitations of The Study

Probability sampling was impossible due to the unavailability of a list of minority student names early in the semester and the time constraints of this one semester research seminar. While large sample size and the technique of proportional quota sampling greatly increase the representativeness of samples, some caution should still be exercised in generalizations to the larger population.

Quota proportions were based on 1987–88 figures because the 1988–89 figures were unavailable. While some change in the number of minorities in each group may have occurred, knowledgeable personnel at the university gave their assurance that such changes were minimal.

## Characteristics of The Study Sample

Of the 132 minority students in the sample, 58 percent are men and 42 percent are women. Just over a third (37 percent) live on campus, another third (33 percent) live off campus, and the remaining third (30 percent) are commuters.

The time they have spent at Lowell ranges from three weeks (first semester) to just beginning a ninth semester ( $\bar{X}$  = 3.2 semesters;  $md$  = 3.0;  $sd$  = 2.11). The educational level of the head of the household in which they were brought up ranges from third grade to twenty years of schooling ( $\bar{X}$  = 13.5 yrs.;  $md$  = 12.0;  $sd$  = 3.6).

## Discrimination at The University

Of the 132 minority students who took part in this study, twenty-nine (22 percent) had experienced at least one personal incident of discrimination, and forty-three (33 percent) were aware of another minority student's personal incident. Minority students were asked to indicate the sources of their own

incidents from a list of university community personnel. The sources were considered in the analysis only if the student had contact with that source. Of course, all students have contact with other students and teachers. Sixty-two percent of minority students named students as the source of discrimination, and 34 percent named teachers. Of those minority students who had contact with other university personnel, 30 percent named the campus police, 26 percent named financial aid personnel, 21 percent named teaching assistants, 18 percent named athletic personnel, 17 percent named placement personnel, 14 percent named admissions personnel, 7 percent named media personnel, 7 percent named presidential and vice-presidential personnel, 7 percent named deans, and 6 percent named counseling personnel.

### The Nature of Discrimination

Twenty-eight minority students provided written descriptions of the incident that they found most upsetting. Most (46 percent) students wrote about incidents that involved ostracism: events that make them feel like they are not wanted on campus.

“... professor will not pay attention (enough) to answer the students’ questions.”

“... when I was in the first class of lab, it was so difficult to find a lab partner. It seems to me that the majority hate to choose the minority for a lab partner.”

“... in the gym, person of the athletic department stated to us that we didn’t belong there and attempted to remove us. Because we were minorities, he took it into account that we did not attend the school.”

“... in the class... teachers ignore me and they always feel uneasy answering questions as opposed to other students.”

“... a friend told me that his roommates (a quad dorm) rejected his room assignment and tried very hard to get him put in another room.”

One upsetting incident that involved a black female student was mentioned by a few students. As one wrote:

“... a black student tried to get on the elevator at Fox and was screamed at (by students)—hey Blacks go home.”

One Asian student who has suffered ostracism decided that it was *not* discrimination but, perhaps, something that *he* is guilty of:

"... if I've seat first in class, no students have seat near me. I don't think it's race discrimination. Maybe I'm so quiet, not friendly."

But most students showed less self-effacement. Another 29 percent of the descriptions involved verbal harassment by other students on campus.

"... names such as gook, dink, slant eyes, rice propelled..."

"... annoying to hear racial slurs behind your back and can't do much of anything without starting something that will make it worse."

"... people party on weekends and rush to my room without reason (I think they are drunk at the time). Sometimes open my door and run away, yelling improper language."

"... someone just came up to me and say many bad words."

"... I was crossing the road by the traffic lights when a group of students in a car hooted and shouted out, 'Nigger.'"

"... student yelled, 'Spic.'"

"... he then said, 'You are acting like a typical nigger.'"

Some cited the use of racial stereotypes by faculty and students as very upsetting:

"... in a college writing class... my professor was speaking of how tax dollars were spent by welfare programs. He went on to say that he would rather pay for a black man to be fed in jail rather than for his family to be supported by welfare."

"... other students coming up to us asking for drugs."

Other students described experiences of unfair grading, university personnel making them feel like second-class citizens, and racial slurs written on dormitory and campus walls.



## Reporting Discrimination

Of the twenty-nine students who claimed personal incidents of discrimination, only four reported the incident: one to the president, one to a special assistant to the president, one to the dean of students, and one unspecified. Some insight into why minority students tend not to report these incidents can be gained from the written comments of two minority students:

"... I don't report such incidents because I feel reporting is no cure and it can make the situation worse."

"... As a freshman, I was too intimidated to report such a thing, so it went by unrecognized."

## Characteristics of Students Who Experience Discrimination

Female minority students are just as likely as male minority students to experience discrimination at the university (22 percent vs. 22 percent). Four characteristics were identified, however, that increase the likelihood of discrimination.

The data indicate that African-American students are more likely to experience these incidents than are Hispanic or Asian students (28 percent vs. 24 percent vs. 18 percent, respectively).

The longer the student has been at the university, the more likely the student to have these experiences. For incoming freshmen (on campus three weeks at the time of data collection), 15 percent experienced an incident of discrimination. For those who had completed at least one semester, but not more than four, 22 percent experienced an incident. For those who had completed at least five semesters, but not more than eight, 41 percent had experienced an incident.

Minority students who live on campus are more likely to experience discrimination than are students who live off campus or who commute to school (27 percent vs. 23 percent vs. 15 percent, respectively). The results also indicate that minority students whose parental head of household has an educational level of high school or less are somewhat more likely to experience discrimination than are students whose parental head of household completed some college. This finding, however, was only true for Asian students, leading one to speculate that fluency in English may be the factor that is associated with class background.

## Problems Associated with Studying Racism on Campus

It is certainly not an understatement to say that racism is a sensitive area to study—sensitive, I found, not just to administrators but to the research students

undertaking the study. Instructors who choose to do a similar study should be aware of two particular problem areas: (1) problems associated with the use of study results and (2) classroom experiences related to the sensitive nature of this area of study.

### **The Use of Study Results**

It is important to try to assure the use of study results before the project begins. It was clear before our study began that if study findings indicated that racism was a campus problem, this information *could* be used to better the academic community. To increase the chances of beneficial use, an outlet for the information must be found before the class begins. Also, since racist attitudes exist on all levels of society, multiple outlets should be chosen. To this end, I briefly discussed the upcoming study with institutional personnel who most likely would be able to translate study findings into positive practical action—the president of the university, the vice-president of University Relations and Development, the director of Minority Student Affairs, and the chairperson of the university's Equal Educational Opportunity Committee. Each was assured that the impetus for study was to improve the quality of the academic environment, and each was promised a report on the results of the class project. Thus, I felt we had some assurance that if our study indicated the existence of a potential or real problem, remedial action would be taken.

This action allowed me to assure the class that what they were about to learn in my course was not just academic, that what they produced may make a positive difference in their own community, and that the research in which they were about to engage had an importance beyond that of normal college classroom endeavors. I found that for all students this knowledge strengthened their incentive to learn and to complete the project on time.

### **Classroom Problems Related to Studying Racism**

Probably, the most important problems to be dealt with were those that arose in the classroom and were directly related to the sensitive nature of doing a study on racism. First, a bit about the class. This undergraduate research course is devoted entirely to teaching students the process of survey research, including statistical analysis via the use of the computer. There were nineteen students in this one-semester class, including two minority students.

As the students began to operationalize their propositions about discrimination against minority students on campus and to construct the survey instrument, problems related to the study of racism on campus began to surface. The

majority of students began to display anxiety about undertaking the study. A few students were adamant that we were wasting our time—that racism did not exist on our campus and so believed the study to be “stupid.” It soon became apparent, through discussion, that the main problem was that most students were nervous about approaching minority students to participate in the study; many admitted that they had never personally interacted with a member of a minority group. One student, a Viet Nam veteran, was anxious about approaching Asian students. To alleviate anxiety, the final class before data collection was devoted entirely to role playing. Various scenarios of what might occur during data collection were acted out by the students. Discussion focused on how to make the approach and how to respond to refusals, both polite and impolite. Having the two minority students in class added to the success of this exercise by making the role playing more realistic. This exercise increased the students’ confidence about their ability to face the unknown.

It was not, however, only nonminority students who were experiencing difficulty. One of the minority students also expressed an unwillingness to go ahead with the study. In a private conversation, I discovered that her reticence was based on her fear that little or no racism would be substantiated by our study. To understand this fear, one must understand that people who have experienced discriminatory incidents because of irrational criteria such as physical differences are often not secure in their belief in the ignorance of prejudice. Thus, they are often not quite sure if the real reason is that there is something wrong with *them*. If our study indicated that other minority students were not sharing her experiences of discrimination, then the study findings might strengthen her belief in her own personal inferiority.

Despite various fears, all students successfully completed their data collection assignments and were somewhat surprised that the whole endeavor was much easier than anticipated.

### **Impact of the Study**

The results of our study indicated that one in every five minority students surveyed could document by written description a personal discriminatory incident. For African-American and Hispanic students, one in every four students could document such an incident. The greater the interaction of minority students with other members of the academic community (as measured by length of time on campus and residence status), the higher the rate of reported discrimination. For minority students in their last two years of education, 40 percent provided a written description of a personal incident.

It is interesting to note that the results of the study impacted not only on university personnel who were identified as outlets for the study results before

the course began but on the students taking the course. During the analysis part of the course, several students told me that the information they collected, particularly the written descriptions of discrimination, was affecting their own attitudes and behaviors toward minority students on campus. They were particularly disturbed by accounts of nonminority students ostracizing minorities and felt that they should go out of their way to make these students feel more comfortable on campus.

Initial institutional reaction appeared to be promising for positive change. For example, almost immediately after receiving a copy of the study, the president of the university issued the American Council on Education's publication, *One-Third of a Nation*, to administrative personnel and selected committees. This report documents the problems of minority participation in higher education. While this may have been coincidental, the response from others was not. The chairperson of the university's Equal Educational Opportunity Committee sent a copy of the class report on racism to all committee members, asking that each submit strategies for change. These would be forwarded to the president of the university for future corrective action. The director of Minority Student Affairs reported to the class that their report provided him with the necessary evidence to back up his claims of discrimination on campus by substantiating that discriminatory incidents were not isolated but an everyday part of the academic life of minority students.

Despite the promise of initial reaction, no real changes were apparent by the second month after the study's completion. The director of Minority Student Affairs reported the continuation of racial incidents. Several students from the research class, who came by to inquire about the study's impact, were frustrated by the university's slow response. In informal discussions, they arrived at the conclusion that while they had provided "scientific information" about the discriminatory environment of their academic community, and they had produced an awareness of the need for change in people in power in the community, their actions had produced only the necessary but not sufficient conditions for social change. . . . that evidence often has to be enriched with political activity.

Over the next few months, I became aware that the report of our study was being widely disseminated, read, and discussed by a significant number of people on campus, and that several minority student, staff, and faculty organizations were becoming more vocal in their demands that things change on campus.

By the time the students in my research class graduated this past June, the president had announced several initiatives to combat racism on our campus. Among these was the promise to create a senior level minority affairs position charged with the responsibility of developing a clear university policy condemning and prohibiting racism on campus, along with the resistibility of assessing and monitoring the educational careers of minority students both in and out of

the classroom. It was clear that this was a positive, presidential response to the campus unrest stimulated by the circulation of our study. However, whether or not the future will find that the student research in this course improved the quality of their academic community will not truly be known until the class of 1993, when the study will be reproduced and the data compared by a new cohort of research students.

Social research methods courses have traditionally served as the means by which students of sociology learn the techniques of social research. The "learning by doing" model of course design had been found to be effective in not only transmitting these techniques but in improving student attention and attitudes toward research methods. The course design presented in this paper fulfills these outcomes but goes one step further in an attempt to reach an objective that should be implicit in all sociology courses—that students use their knowledge and understanding of society to "better" that society. It is argued that the most effective training ground for this endeavor is the student's own academic community.

Racism on campus, as a reflection of racism in the wider society, was chosen as a class topic. This paper elaborated on some of the problems and experiences that can be expected to confront other instructors of research methods who choose to undertake the same or similar project on campus racism. The author encourages instructors to do so.

## UNDERGRADUATE MINORITY STUDENT SURVEY

The following survey is being given to students in order to assess the 'climate' of The University of Lowell for minority undergraduate students. Please **DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ON THE SURVEY**. All information is to be given anonymously. When you have completed your survey, put it in the plain white envelope provided, seal, and drop it into the larger manilla envelope. We appreciate your responding honestly to all questions.

Thank you for your time.

PLEASE CIRCLE THE NUMBER OF THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE  
TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. To which minority group do you belong?

- |                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| African/American . . . . .  | 1 |
| Asian/American . . . . .    | 2 |
| Hispanic/American . . . . . | 3 |

IF YOU DO NOT BELONG TO ONE OF THESE GROUPS, PLEASE  
RETURN SURVEY

2. What is your sex?

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| male . . . . .   | 1 |
| female . . . . . | 2 |

3. How many semesters have you been at U-Lowell (including this one)?

\_\_\_\_\_ semesters

4. What is your college residence status?

- |                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| live on campus . . . . .       | 1 |
| noncommuter (off campus) . . . | 2 |
| commuter . . . . .             | 3 |

5. What was the last year of schooling completed by the head of the household in which you were brought up?

\_\_\_\_\_ grade

6. Have you personally experienced an incident(s) of discrimination at U-Lowell (been a victim)?

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| yes . . . . . | 1 |
| no . . . . .  | 2 |

7. Are you aware of *any* incident of discrimination against a minority student at U-Lowell?

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| yes . . . . . | 1 |
| no . . . . .  | 2 |

8. IF YOU HAVE NOT PERSONALLY BEEN A VICTIM OF DISCRIMINATION AT U-LOWELL, PLEASE GO TO QUESTION 9.

If you have personally experienced discrimination, please circle the numbers below to indicate which members of the U-Lowell community discriminated against you. CIRCLE 1 IF A MEMBER OF THIS GROUP DISCRIMINATED AGAINST YOU, 2 IF A MEMBER OF THIS GROUP DID NOT DISCRIMINATE AGAINST YOU, AND 3 IF YOU HAVE NOT HAD ANY INTERACTION WITH THIS GROUP.

	YES	NO	NO CONTACT
a. Other Students . . . . .	1	2	3
b. Teachers . . . . .	1	2	3
c. Admissions Office Personnel . . . . .	1	2	3
d. Financial Aid Personnel . . . . .	1	2	3
e. Campus Police . . . . .	1	2	3
f. Teaching Assistants . . . . .	1	2	3
g. Library Personnel . . . . .	1	2	3
h. President and Vice-Presidents . . . . .	1	2	3
i. Athletic Personnel . . . . .	1	2	3
j. The Deans . . . . .	1	2	3
k. Counselling Personnel . . . . .	1	2	3
l. Media Personnel . . . . .	1	2	3
m. Health Services Personnel . . . . .	1	2	3
n. Placement Personnel . . . . .	1	2	3
o. Other (please specify) _____	1	2	3

9. If you have personally been a victim of discrimination at U-Lowell, please *briefly describe the most upsetting incident below*. If you were not a victim but are aware of such incidents at U-Lowell, please *briefly describe the most upsetting incident below*.

10. If you have personally been a victim of discrimination at U-Lowell AND you reported this incident, to whom did you report and what action was taken?

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